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Bard

Mrs. Harbinger and her Elf Present:
Instant Wisdom at Swan Lake

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Sarah Bastacky

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2019

Synopsis

Instant Wisdom is the story of a green woman named Mrs. Harbinger, who we find at home mourning for her escaped pet bird. Without a bird, Harbinger's world is glum and boring, and she spends her days puttering about in a big old house all alone. Another thing is that white birds seem to be around everywhere, taunting her. This kind of pitiful boredom and insistent haunting calls for an adventure, and so the action begins when she spies from the kitchen window a mysterious egg. Harbinger steals the egg, nest and all, from its peaceful spot up in a tree. The trouble is, she doesn't know how to hatch the egg on her own. Quickly accepting that she needs help, Harbinger does what many of us would do and Googles it.

A matchmaking website shows her some potential egg hatchers. The first of her options are deemed too scary or too old, but the Goldilocks of the creatures, an elf with a mirrored face, catches her eye, and she determines to enlist him in her mission to hatch the egg. She hurries away on horseback, making the long backwards journey to the elf's secretive and distant location. Along the way, the rejected creatures from the website cross paths with Harbinger, the taller and more purple of the two gifting her a silver key.

Harbinger anxiously approaches the elf's digs, the egg in her knapsack having grown significantly larger since we last saw it. The elf, a professional at hatching eggs, takes out his set of keys and grows frustrated when his trusty old tools fail to do the job. Harbinger remembers that she has a key of her own, and offers it to the elf. The key unlocks the egg and initiates the hatching process, but this hasty birthing has consequences: the egg bursting and literally blows Harbinger offstage. From the egg emerges a tall swan with greater stage presence than anyone has anticipated. As the swan grows, the ensemble reveal their own true allegiances to it. Outnumbered by swans, Harbinger and the elf are left in the unfamiliar territory of a newborn world order.

Artist Statement

Telling a story is just like making a painting or sculpture: layering different times and places, cobbling together disparately sourced materials, training the winds of abstraction to give

gusto and coherence to an overabundance of visual and narrative information. I like to compile things so haphazardly that plenty of secrets writhe within. A piece seems complete to me only if its open-endedness spawns new worlds for viewers and participants. Anyone can enter through some porthole--silliness, doom, recognition of an image or material--as the story undertakes the gritty and fallible task of telling itself.

The painfully analog substances of Mrs. Harbinger's world are conduits for dreaming of being alive. Unruly puppets and panoramic landscape abide by the strict-ish rules of the scenario (wheels, pulleys, poorly concealed stage magic). By inviting degraded landscapes and figures made of recycled materials into the transformative framework of a puppet show, these objects and images can teleport from the base reality of what they are, into the seductive, frightening and joyous territory of what they could be.

This mutability has found a real home in puppets for me. I use puppetry to feel my way around things that need to be seen from many vantage points: old ladies, trains, monsters, rivers, stretched out landscapes, cartoons, friendship, animals. The vulnerable space of play is an explorative way to excavate the associative qualities and humor trailing away from some of the Big Questions. "Instant" wisdom is a contradiction that embraces both failures and epiphanies. Of course wisdom takes time and experience to cultivate, but what does it look like when wisdom materializes instantaneously? Is it sold in a box in the cleaning supply aisle? Is it what happens right after you have a "really good idea"? *Instant Wisdom* searches for answers in inhabiting the existing, excessive materials of junk and fairytale.





